

am I lonely? (cause it feels right) by TolkienGirl

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Summary: An important detail: Steve didn't even finish "Lord of the Flies," much less "Lord of the Rings." [future-fic/character study]

am I lonely? (cause it feels right)

"So we were talking about the Istari," Dustin announces, shoveling a triple-stacked forkful of waffles into his mouth.

Steve has got to stop feeding them. "Ista-what?"

"Wizards," Dustin says. "From *Lord of the Rings*?"

"Oh, OK." Just like that—two words, and it should be fully evident how far King Steve has fallen. Wizards are a perfectly normal topic of conversation.

"You're probably Gandalf." Dustin swipes at a sticky spot on his chin. "Which makes us four the hobbits. But then again, there were five wizards, you know?"

Steve doesn't.

"Gandalf, Saruman, Radagast, and the two blue wizards," Dustin explains. "Pallando and Alatar. Not much known about them."

Steve crunches on a piece of bacon and tries to look like he knows what Dustin's talking about.

"Shit." Dustin shakes his head, curls bobbing. "Steve, you've never even read the *Silm*, have you?"

"Pretty sure you already know the answer to that, bud." He steals one of Dustin's sausage links now, which Dustin totally deserves, because Steve has been humoring a lot of nerd-talk today.

Dustin sighs. Doesn't even explain what the *Silm* is. "Right. We'll start with *The Hobbit*."

An important detail: Steve didn't even finish *Lord of the Flies*, much less *Lord of the Rings*. He read like one nasty chapter, wrote a book report that got him a solid C+.

You'd think, after all, that he'd better equipped to write about

teenage savagery.

Point is, he's quick to get bored and sucks at stringing words together with any kind of...effectiveness. He can't tell stories in stubbed pencil, and he can't tell them in pictures like Jonathan can.

"It was at this point that Bilbo stopped. Going on from there was the bravest thing he ever did. The tremendous things that happened afterwards were as nothing compared to it. He fought the real battle in the tunnel alone, before he ever saw the vast danger that lay in wait."

Pen on paper. No—that's too much, too soon. Pencil on paper, stubbed as always, shaking a little even though there's nobody to see.

Dear Nance

(Crossed out. This is why you can't risk ink.)

Dear Nancy,

I miss you.

It's a letter he doesn't send. But that's alright.

"So, what did you think of it?" Dustin's at his door with a stack of books in straw-colored binding. Steve has the door half-shut behind him, because his parents are home for once. He's not ashamed of Dustin, far from it. He just can't deal with having this conversation with his parents, the whole, *I pal around with a bunch of middle-school nerds who are actually goddamn heroes*, now or ever.

"It's cool, man. It's cool."

"Gandalf, right? Or *Smaug*. How about *Smaug*? Raddest dragon ever. Lucas tried to make an argument for the ones in *Pern* for a while, but Mike and I gave him total shit for it." He thrusts the books forward, like Steve wants them. And maybe he does. *"Fellowship"* starts out a little slow, but it's worth it."

"Is Bilbo in it?"

"Oh, sweet." Dustin's face lights up. "You liked Bilbo. I didn't know if —anyway, yeah. He's in it." He jams his hat down firmer on his head, denting the foam front. "OK, man. See you later."

Steve starts in on chapter one that night.

The real battle.

"I miss you," Nancy says, one day, in the corner of a hallway, at exactly the moment when Steve finally isn't thinking about her. "As friends."

She's braver than he is, of course. She says it first. She breaks him apart and then lays the first stones for rebuilding.

Something about that is deeply unfair.

Steve's throat tightens, but he nods. "Cool. See you around." He doesn't call her Nance anymore; he's trained himself out of it.

The day he dumps all three books on the D&D table in the Wheelers' basement and tells the Party he's finished is a pretty damn good one. Of course, now he's stuck with roughly ten million hypotheticals about who he'd be out of the fellowship, and whether he would have brought the Dead Army with him to Gondor, instead of just taking out the Corsair ships—

And honestly, he doesn't mind.

The only thing he minds is telling them he's leaving town. They all have kept tabs on his police academy application, they all know he was accepted.

But somehow, these brilliant little shits have stubbornly labored on keeping up an enormous blind-spot when it comes to *goodbye*.

The tremendous things that happened afterwards were as nothing compared to it.

Steve doesn't choke up at all when the whole gang—plus Hopper and Jane, Nancy and Jonathan—show up to see him off. He leaves from the police station, because Hopper had some extra crap to send with him, and they're a mismatched throng huddled in the parking lot when he steps out the door.

"Aww, shit," he hears himself say, and again, he's not choking up. He's not.

Doesn't matter anyway, because he's smothered by Dustin and Max choking the breath out of him in a hug. The rest follow suit. He even feels Nancy's hand squeeze his for a quick, precious moment.

It's a flurry of a memory, a glittering ball of string that he unwinds in the silent hours of his drive. Usually, he'd crank up the radio. He leaves it off this time, leaves Hawkins behind and takes all the love with him.

He can't see out of his back window, it's blocked out by all his crap. All his earthly goods, like the Bible says, or something.

When you get your nose broken, it never heals quite the same way.

When your parents stay together, it isn't always any better than if they'd just split up.

When you fall in love, there's no way to fall out of it.

When you run to the other side of fear, there are many things to find.

Going on from there was the bravest thing he ever did.